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THE RISE OF DEISM IN YALE COLLEGE¹

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Deism in America, during the first half of the eighteenth century, was of the constructive, not the destructive, sort. Its earlier colonial representatives, like the father of English deism, argued from natural reason for the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the certainty of rewards and punishments, and the life to come. The system was at first hardly distinguished from theism; it was more akin to Butler's *Analogy* than to Hume's *Enquiry*; it took two generations to develop into the revolutionary systems of the doubting Thomases, Paine and Jefferson. Such deism was imbued with optimism and receptive of evidences of design; it was not as yet the thoroughgoing rationalism which would reduce religion to ethics, and revelation to a spiritual law in the natural world. Genetically, this deism arose in a partial reaction against high Calvinism; it taught the transcendence and benevolence of the Deity, but not the depravity of man or the determinism of his moral actions. American deism, in its inceptive stages, thus marked a change from a theology to a theodicy; from the assumptions of decrees inscrutable to the human mind, to an attempt to justify the ways of God to man. The movement began in a conservative way; its first defenders did not argue for natural religion in opposition to revealed, but for revealed religion as a necessary supplement to natural. This was especially noticeable in the two oldest New England colleges. At Harvard deism as a movement of enlightenment developed through opposition. This opposition was first exhibited in 1702 in Cotton Mather's controversial work, the *Christian Philosopher*. Veritable deistic principles were taught toward the middle of the century in the Dudleian lectures on natural religion. Academic attempts to stem the tide of rationalism were made elsewhere; in spite of them, the freshening currents

¹ A chapter from a forthcoming *History of Philosophy in America*, read before the American Philosophical Association, Philadelphia, December 30, 1904.

came stealing in. Thomas Clap, rector of Yale, avowed that the "great design of founding this school was to educate ministers in our own way;" nevertheless he based his moral philosophy upon the deistic Wollaston's *Religion of Nature*. In his *Short Introduction to the Study of Ethics for the Use of Students* he taught that reason was insufficient as the basis of moral obligation, yet that God, when he makes a creature, "communicates to him some degree of his own perfection." The sources of this cheerful outlook upon human nature are somewhat evasive. While a student at Harvard, Clap may have got it from reading the suspected Tillotson; or it may have come from the author's model, the *Ideal World* of Norris, who in turn acknowledged his indebtedness to Malebranche; or, finally, it may have been derived from a certain Cartesian optimist who managed to live in the reputed land of the blue laws. While Clap was president at Yale, a former tutor, Samuel Johnson, wrote as follows in his *Introduction to the Study of Philosophy*:

From the Natural World we evidently demonstrate the Being, Wisdom, Power and Goodness of God. From being perfectly Happy himself and Self-sufficient to his own Happiness, He could have no selfish Views, no other View in Creating and Governing the moral world than that it might be, in the whole, a happy system.

In the days of colonial conservatism Johnson is a marked example of the reactionary. As an undergraduate at Yale, he was warned against reading Descartes, Locke, and Newton; becoming a tutor, he introduced these works into the college library. As a theological student he was cautioned against a certain new philosophy that was attracting attention in England, being told that it would corrupt the pure religion of the country and bring in another system of divinity.² The warning was ineffective, for Johnson as a clergyman took orders in the Church of England and embraced Berkeleyism. The student who by the reading of Bacon had had "opened to him a new world of thought" was now on intimate terms with Berkeley, to whom Pope, the poet of deism, had attributed

² Compare *American Antiquarian Society*, October, 1895. Professor E. C. Smyth claims that the warning was against Locke, but Locke was used as a textbook at Yale from 1717 to 1825. See President Noah Porter in "Mental and Moral Science," *History of Yale College* (New York, 1879).

"every virtue under heaven." Now the Irish idealist, while at Newport, R. I., had composed what Principal Cairns had declared to be the only product of the deistic controversy born in the new world. *Alciphron* was the most thorough, although not the only, work of the kind. In his advertisement the author gave as his design the consideration of the free-thinker in the various lights of atheist, libertine, enthusiast, scorner, critic, metaphysician, fatalist, and skeptic. In its mere sub-title *Alciphron or the Minute Philosopher* exposed the essential weakness of deism, namely, the tendency to reduce every thing to littleness, to microscopic evidences of design.

This work, which was reprinted as an apologetic seventy years later in New Haven by the elder President Dwight, was called by President Porter a criticism of the negative opinions of the times, an attempt to arrest the tide of atheistic and anti-Christian opinion then at its flood, a sketch of a Protean unbelief from the pothouse ribaldry of Mandeville to the ambitious Platonism of Shaftesbury, from the daring acuteness of Collins to the subtle insinuation of Hume.³ But it must be added that, at the same time that Berkeley disposed of the crowd of English freethinkers, he did much to stimulate colonial free-thought. It was he who indirectly nourished the hopes of President Stiles that America might be a land of British liberty in the most complete sense. How that influence was exerted has not yet been precisely shown. It now appears that the idealistic Johnson was the connecting link.

From being occasionally acquainted with Berkeley between 1729 and 1732, Johnson "persuaded the Dean to believe that Yale College would soon become episcopal, and that it had received his immaterial philosophy."⁴ As a result of these representations, Berkeley was induced to patronize this infant seminary by presenting it with some eight hundred and eighty volumes. This formed the best collection of philosophic works then in the colonies. As a local rhymster expressed it, it was to Berkeley's liberal hand that "*Yalensia* owes the power of knowing more, than all her *Sisters* on the western shore."

³ Noah Porter, *Bishop George Berkeley* (New York, 1885), p. 50.

⁴ *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, January 22, 1772, edited by F. B. Dexter (New York, 1901).

To his students Johnson recommended many of these books, while Rector Clap issued a Catalogue of them.⁵

What use the latter made of the thirty-odd deistic books may not be known, as a large chest of the rector's manuscripts was among the plunder taken from New Haven in the Revolution. But another head of the college utilized these works. Ezra Stiles, in turn, student, tutor, and president, left an account telling how he was allured by the inviting circumstances of the college library, how he was led into the darkness of skepticism, and how he finally emerged from deism.⁶ As an undergraduate he apprehended that his religious principles were settled, but about the year 1747, till which time he was full of the sentiments of Calvinism, he had great solicitude about being of the happy number elected to mercy. In his Birthday Memoir he continues:

⁵ Cf. Samuel Johnson, *An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy . . . with Catalogue of the Library of Yale College* (New London, 1743). Thomas Clap, *a Catalogue of some of the most valuable Authors* (New London, 1743). The deistic books common to both catalogues are marked with an asterisk. Johnson's list is as follows: 'On Pneumatology, read, *Le Clerks*, Pneumatologia, *Locks, Hum. Und. passim, *Wollaston's Rel. Nat. *Clarks* Letters to Dodwell and Liebnictz, *Malbranch*, *Des Cartes* Metaph. *Norris's Ideal World, Bp. *Berkleys* New Theory of Vision, *Principles of Human Knowledge, *Dialogues & *Tract. De Motu. Bp. *Browne's* Procedure & Extent of Hum. Und. & Divine Analogy, *Shaftsburys* Philosophical Rhapsody, *Watt's Philosophical Essays. On Physico-Theology, read, *Derham's* Astro- & Physico Theology, *Ray's* Wisdom of God in the Creation, *Cheyn's Philosophical Principles of Religion, *Whiston's* Astronomical Principles of Religion, *Newentyte*, *Bently* & others *Boyles* Lecture. On *Natural Religion*, read, *Wilkin's *Natural Religion*, *Wollaston, *Clarke's* Demonstration &c. *Cudworth's Intellectual System, & Foundation of Morality, *Cumberland's* Law of Nature. On the *Evidences of Christianity* read . . . of the Moderns, *Grotius *De Ver. Christ. Rel.* *Stillingfleet's *Origines*, *Jenkin's* Reasonableness of Christianity, *Clarke's*, *Kidder's* Demonstration of the Messiah, *Sykes*, *Chandler*, *Smallbrook*, *Conybear*, *Foster*, *Bp. *Berkley's* *Minute Phil.* *Chapman's* *Eusebius*, *Roger's* *Eighth Sermons*, Bp. *Butler's* *Analogy*.' Deistic works cited by Clap and not by Johnson are:—*Cumberland* de Legibus Naturae; *Culverwell* of the Light of Nature, *Observations* Divine and Moral; *Clark* on the Being & Attributes of God; *Whistons* *Boyles* Lectures; *Gastrel's* *Boyles* Lectures; *Wise* against Atheism; *Parker* de Deo; *Divine Dialogues*; A. Bp. *Cambray's* Existence of God; *More* on Atheism; *Grew* on the Being of God; Bp. *Chandler's* Defence of Christianity; *Woolsey's* Rational Grounds of the Bible; *Smith's* Appeal to Reason; *The Religious Phylosopher*; *Reason and Religion* Adjusted; *Watt's* Caveat against Infidelity; . . . 'The whole Number in the Library is about 2600.'

⁶ Abel Holmes, *The Life of Ezra Stiles* (Boston, 1798).

In the year 1748 I had not indeed a disbelief, but I was in a state of skepticism, and ardently sought a clear belief of the being and attributes of God. Close attention to Dr. Clarke's demonstration, and above all, to the views of surrounding nature, at length pretty fully established me in this fundamental doctrine. . . . In 1750 a conversation with a young gentleman, of an amiable and virtuous character, first raised in me scruples and doubts respecting Revelation, which have cost me many a painful hour. But I most assiduously applied to the study of the evidences of revelation and by 1754 it appeared to be the best system, on the foot of natural religion.

To this "view of his mind," Stiles added in 1768 a "Review of those Authors, which he read during the rise, height, and decline, of his skepticism." This may be given in detail as exhibiting both the pervasive influence of English thought and the mental independence of a young colonial. In 1747, the narrator continues,

I read with attention Doctor Clarke's Demonstration of the being and attributes of God; but did not find entire satisfaction. I proceeded through his evidences of Natural and Revealed Religion; but did not find his arguments conclusive for either. I did not perceive his reasonings so strong and conclusive as I had been accustomed to perceive those for the solar system, mathematics, and experimental philosophy. For many years I had been fed with demonstrations as to science. In 1748 I read Shaftsbury's *Characteristics*, and admired them as sublime views of Nature, and of the moral government of the Most High. I was particularly charmed with his rhapsody. At this time I had no thoughts of deism, and least of all that this was the deists' Bible, or their favourite author, though some passages, in the third volume, shocked me. At the same time I read and was so highly delighted with Pope's *Essay on Man*, that I committed to memory the first Epistle, and large paragraphs of the other Epistles; and repeated portions of it frequently by myself, in my chamber, and when I walked or rode abroad. I read also Castrell's and Whiston's *Boyle's Lectures*. Scott's preliminary discourses to the defence of Revelation seemed to give up too much of Revelation, and reduced it to Platonism, and a republication of natural religion. About 1751 I read Turnbull's *Moral Philosophy*. I was pleased with his scheme of treating moral, as Newton had treated natural, philosophy. I had previously to this read Butler's *Analogy*, which is a masterly production; but it served little more than to remove some rubbish, and to shew that there are no greater absurdities to be charged against revealed religion, than against some of the most acknowledged principles of natural religion; and so it still left me destitute of the positive evidence of Revelation. By all these authors I had advanced so far as to see, that Revelation was a most rational and sublime scheme, far exceeding natural religion. I only wanted to see that it was true, and positively of divine original. I had hitherto not seen Tindal, nor been conversant with any books, that directly attacked Revelation. In 1756, I read Tindal, Collins, and Bolingbroke.

As a result of ten years' reading, Stiles answered that he found himself able to obviate, to his own satisfaction, any and all objections, the most of which are very trifling. He gives evidence of this by scrutinizing those skeptical lights which were just coming over the horizon of the western world. In a hitherto unpublished letter of 1759,⁷ speaking of Lord Kames's *Essays* as curiosities in this country, he says:

I do not know what is his Lordship's opinion of Revelation—but am by no means certain but that a Man may entertain his Lordship's Speculations with respect to Liberty & Necessity and yet Confirm Believers of Revelation; I think I may add, that I am acquainted with such. I am in no doubt but there are more Christians & honest Revelationists of this opinion, than Deists. I am so far from thinking it a general principle of Deism, that I question if there are ten Deists in the World carry their Idea of moral Necessity so high as his Lordship.

The Mr. Hume whom Dr. Leiland confutes directly opposes a supernatural Revelation—& strongly denies the Possibility of those Things which are the proper Evidences of Christianity: and I think treats the Subject with Caprice & Insolence: self-confident, nobly full of his own Discernment, he enjoys the supreme complacency of believing himself entrusted at last with the grand Secret imparted but to the happy few that the Basis or one main found^a of Christianity is an absolute Delusion. And truly it is a new Discovery that it is beyond the reach of Omnipotence to suspend, alter, or counteract the general Laws he himself has established in the Creation. . . . Shall a King be able by a Seal and other infallible Signatures to evince his Proclamations to his Subjects so that they shall have no doubt of his Majesty's Will: and shall the Great Omnipotent King of the Universe be unable to evidence & ascertain his Will to such a Handful of Intelligences the small System of Man? . . . So the Newtonian philosophy tho founded on Demonstration is yet disbelieved in many foreign Universities. A Man of less Science & less prepossession will rationally believe & receive, what sublimer Minds of great Learning in vain attempt to comprehend. There is a moral Jaundice, which some peculiar Refinements in Speculation always bring on that tinges all Objects. The Removing of this is the first Step to discerning the Truth. I think Dr. Leiland deserves highly of the Christian world. The Self sufficiency of the Deists will be a very great Obstacle to their seeing the Truth. Men of Sense ought to be treated with Candor & politeness—whatever be their Religion.

To this dissertation there were shortly added some remarks on two more of the deistic leaders, and, what is especially significant, a

⁷ As given in the Stiles manuscripts, at Yale University, p. 436; this is the first draft of a letter to Mr. Bennet, of Edinburgh, September 14, 1759. Stiles adds: "This letter not sent but an amended copy."

virtual confession of the influence of their optimism upon one brought up in the darkened chambers of Calvinism. Writing further to his Scotch correspondent, Stiles continues:

It is to be wished that Dr. Middleton, tho' a Sceptic if not an Unbeliever, had examined & discussed the Evidences of the Miracles of the first century in the same masterly manner he has done those of the second and third, methinks the Competition would burst forth irresistable Conviction. . . . Lord Bolingbroke appears to be better acquainted with political, than theological Learning. He that perfectly understands the natures and connexions of the several Kingdoms and Politics in Europe, is very ignorant of the Administration of God. . . . I doubt not the universe is very generally happy, an omnipotent & most benevolent Being had not else given it Birth. the Infelicity of this world would be in the universe' plan but as spots only scarcely perceptible spots in the Sun's bright orb.⁸

Having described the deistic movement in old England, Stiles as *Anglus-Americanus* turns to the movement in New England and gives a vivid account of the mental agitations of local thought during the French and Indian War:

As we are in the midst of the struggle of Infidelity I expect no great Reformation until that [Revelation] is demonstratively established. . . . From the Conduct of the Officers of the Army you entertain an Expectation favorable to Virtue. Far from this I imagine the American Morals & Religion were never in so much danger as from our Concern with the Europeans in the present War. They put on indeed in their public Conduct the Mark of public Virtue—and the Officers endeavor to restrain the vices of the private Soldiery while on Duty. But I take it the Religion of the Army is Infidelity & Gratification of the appetites. . . . They propagate in a genteel & insensible Manner the most corrupting and debauching Principles of Behavior. It is doubted by many Officers if in fact the Soul survives the Body—but if it does, they ridicule the notion of moral accountableness, Rewards & Punishments in another life. . . . I look upon it that our Officers are in Danger of being corrupted with vicious principles, & many of them I doubt not will in the End of the War come home minute philosophers initiated in the polite Mysteries & vitiated morals of Deism. And this will have an unhappy Effect on a sudden to spread Deism or at least Scepticism thro' these Colonies. And I make no doubt, instead of the Controversies of Orthodoxy & Heresy, we shall soon be called to the defence of the Gospel itself. At Home the general grand Dispute is on the Evidences of Revelation—some few of your small Folks indeed keep warming up the old Pye, & crying Calvinism, Orthodoxy &c—these are your Whitefields, Romaines, &c that make a pother: but the greater Geniuses among the Ministers are ranging the Evidences

⁸ Stiles MS, pp. 465-67.

of Revelation to the public View, expugning the Augustine Interpretations of Scripture with the other corruptions of the Latin Chh, yet retained among protestants—and endeavoring a just & unexceptionable, rational Explication of the great Doctrines of the Gospel. The Bellamys &c of New England will stand no Chance with the Corruptions of Deism which, I take it, are spreading apace in this Country. I prophesy your *Two Witnesses* will avail more towards curing the Contagion than thousands of Volumes filled with cant orthodox phrases & the unintelligible Metaphysics of Scholastic Divinity, which is a Corruption of Christianity with *arabian* philosophy.⁸

The work here referred to is Jared Spark's *Two Witnesses; or, Religion Supported by Reason and Divine Revelation*.⁹ The conclusion drawn by its author, that the overvaluing of reason tends to promote atheism, was one not held by Stiles. The story of the latter's efforts to foster liberty of thought in Yale has been told before, but not in its entirety.¹⁰ Mr. Henry Collins, a merchant of Newport, R. I., had offered a dozen books¹¹ to the college library on the condition of their being deposited there for the free use of the students. He had, however, been informed that Rector Clap would not suffer the volumes, because they contained heresy. But when Stiles endeavored to represent the college as an excellent and generous institution both for science and religion, the books were forwarded, but only to be suppressed. Hereupon, Stiles wrote to the "rigid rector" what was not only a defense of a promising college patron, but an appeal for unrestricted thought.¹²

Mr. Collins remarkt strongly on the taking Dr. Clark's Sermons out of the Library: who told him of it I dont know. And I have heard those who are no friends to Clark say, they tho't it had not so generous an aspect in an Academy for Liberal Education. I have been hard put to it to defend it, for it is known to particular persons all over the Country. The Quakers & Baptists say they read any of our Books, but we prevent our Children reading theirs—and some have retorted and said it is the same principle as that on w^c the Romanists keep protestant Books from the pple & from their Universities too. I believe the same reflexion would be made if Baxter's Works, or Calvin's Institutions, or

⁸ Stiles MS, pp. 469-71. Letter from Newport, R. I., September 24, 1759.

⁹ New London, 1746.

¹⁰ L. Van Becelaere, *Philosophie en Amérique*, p. 55; quoting G. Stanley Hall (New York, 1903).

¹¹ Mostly Baptist, viz., Sternwell's *Sermons*, 4 vols.; *Answer to Rusen*, Foster's *Sermons*, 4 vols.; *Answer to Tindal, Oj Heresy, etc.*, Cornthwait's Tracts.

¹² Stiles MS, p. 460; postscript of letter of August 6, 1759.

Dr. Twiss, or Dr. Ridgely was to be taken & kept out of the Library. Different men indeed object from different motives, some from the Love of Orthodoxy & some from the Hatred of it, & some from the generous Sentiments of that generous & equal Liberty for which Protestants & Dissenters have made so noble a Stand. It is true with this Liberty Error may be introduced; but turn the Tables the propagation of Truth may be extinguished. Deism has got such Head in this Age of Licentious Liberty, that it would be in vain to try to stop it by hiding the Deistical Writings: and the only Way left to conquer & demolish it, is to come forth into the open Field & Dispute this matter on even Footing—the Evidences of Revelation in my opinion are nearly as demonstrative as Newton's Principia, & these are the Weapons to be used. Deism propagates itself in America very fast, & on this Foundⁿ, strange as it may seem, is the Chh of Engld built up in polite Life. A man may be an excellent Chhman & yet a profound Deist. While public popular Delusion is kept up by Deistical Priests, sensible Laymen despise the whole, & yet, strange Contradiction! joyn it, and entice others to joyn it also.—and they say all priests are alike, we all try to deceive Mankind, there is no Trust to be put in us. *Truth* & this alone being *our* Aim in fact, open, frank & generous we shall avoid the very appearance of Evil.

The reason for the rejection of these New-side books lay not so much in Clap's anti-deistic sentiments, and his scornful references to the light of nature¹³ as in what was suggested in the last part of the foregoing passage. In the eyes of the Old lights, Anglicanism meant tyranny. Having in mind the defection of Samuel Johnson, an alleged Arminian plot against the college was laid bare. An anonymous Episcopalian had written a "Letter from a Gentleman in the West," which said that

if once a Professor of Divinity, according to their Design is settled in the College, good-bye to our Schemes. The Old Religion of the Country, the Colonial Doctrines, as they are called, will be establish'd in the House, there perpetually taught and rivetted in the minds of the Pupils' and they will go out into the world trammell'd with those trite doctrines of the Insufficiency of Human Reason.

Measures were now taken to stop the infiltration of that Arminianism so kindred to deism. By a vote of the president and fellows, students were to be established in the principles of religion according to the Assembly's Catechism, Dr. Ames's *Medulla*, and *Cases of Conscience*. Yale was now outwardly a stronghold of orthodoxy; how it came to be called a hotbed of infidelity is a matter of later

¹³ *History of Doctrines of New England* (New Haven, 1755).

times. It was not until after the Revolutionary War that the satirist could describe undergraduate skepticism, could tell how the "clock-work gentleman" was made "twixt the Tailor and the Player, and Hume, and Tristram and Voltaire."¹⁴ All this might have been expected. Action and reaction were equal. As at Harvard opposition had brought eclecticism, so at Yale the policy of suppression brought an explosion of free-thinking upon the advent of the Franco-American deism of Citizen Paine and President Jefferson.

¹⁴ John Trumbull, *The Progress of Dullness* (New Haven, 1782), p. 21.